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Chile: Pinochet Versus the Junta

Under the 1980 Constitution, President Pinochet (who is also Army commander in chief) governs with a military junta composed of the heads of the Navy, Air Force, National Police (Carabineros), and the deputy chief of the Army. On paper, the Junta possesses a variety of legislative powers, including authority to approve treaties, propose and sanction legislation, and call plebiscites. Pinochet, however, generally has treated it as little more than a rubberstamp. With the onset of massive protests against the regime last year, the Junta began to play a more active role in governmental decisionmaking. The trend has continued through the first half of 1984, with the Junta moderating several of the President's hardline legislative proposals.

We believe that the Junta will continue to assert itself, but without challenging Pinochet's authority. Over the next two years, it probably will work to restrain the President's authoritarian predilections and push for a partial return to civilian rule before the constitutional target of 1989. If successful, the Junta could contribute to overall stability in Chile by reducing political polarization and the chances for renewed violent protests.

The Military's Political Role

Chile's military government does not fit the classic pattern of collegial decisionmaking by a highly politicized officer corps. Instead, Pinochet has forged a personalist regime that relies heavily on civilian advisers and draws support from numerous sources—including the business community and rightist parties—in addition to the armed forces. Direct military participation in the government is largely restricted to the Junta members.

The Junta itself has been anxious not to identify the military institution with the Pinochet regime. For example, earlier this year Defense Minister Carvajal, a retired admiral, implied that some of the administration's political proposals enjoyed the

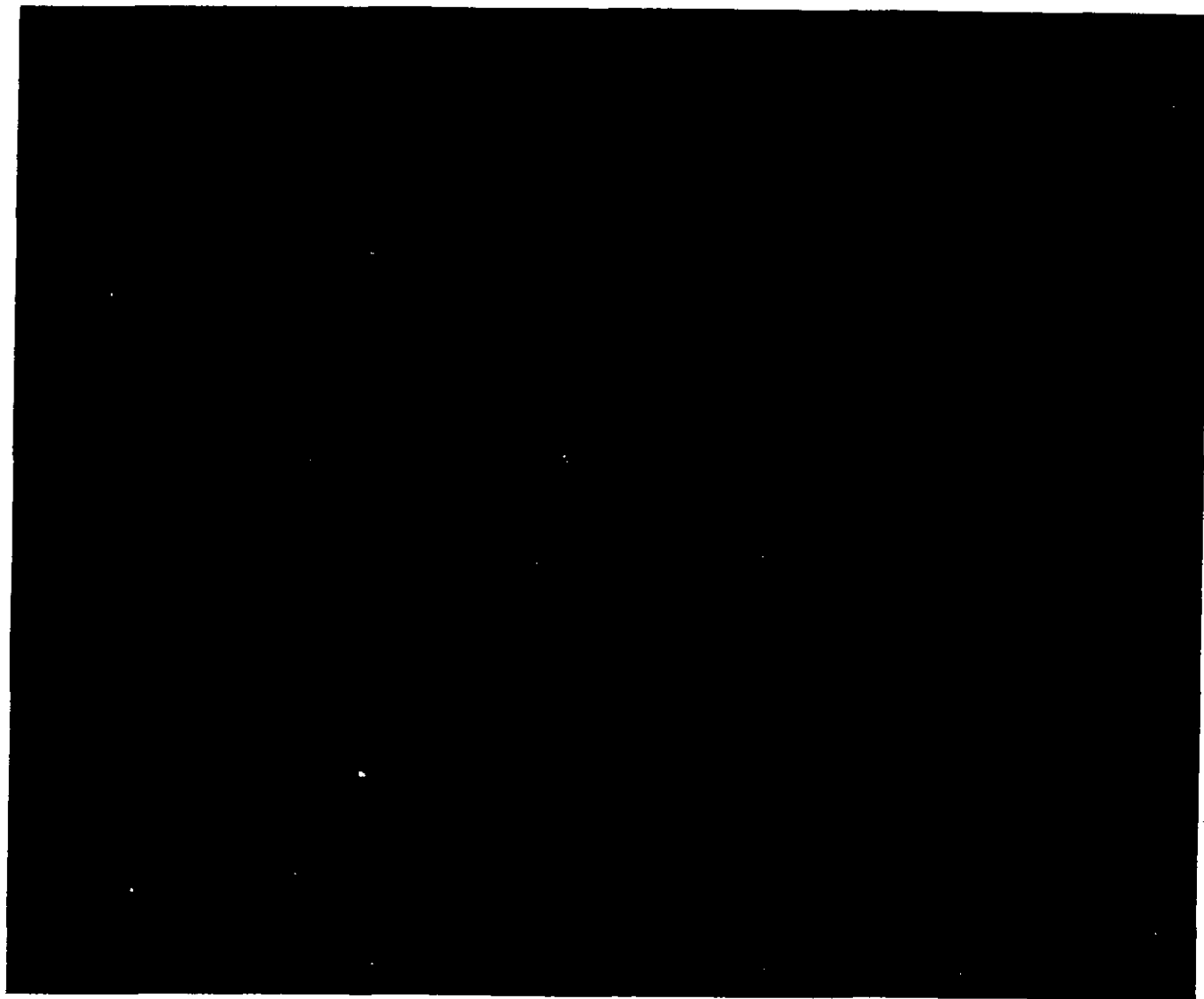
support of the armed forces. He was publicly castigated by Admiral Merino, the Navy's Junta member, for claiming to speak for the military. Merino reaffirmed the apolitical and purely professional role of the military while asserting that Junta members alone were involved in politics.

Two other factors minimize the extent of military participation in politics below the Junta level. The Chilean armed forces possess a strong tradition of discipline and hierarchy that allows political activity in the highest echelons, but offers junior officers only the choice of obeying their superiors or leaving the service. In addition, the officer corps is a closed, inbred group with a very narrow range of political views, which are readily understood and acted upon by the Junta members. The strong influence of these factors is attested to by the lack of clamor in the military over the past decade for a wider role in the government.

The Junta Flexes Its Muscles

This year, the Junta has continued to question presidential initiatives. One was a proposal to alter the Constitution to permit Pinochet to call plebiscites without the Junta's approval and to install a congress—either elected or appointed—in 1987.

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The Junta's Motives

We believe there are two main reasons for the Junta's drive toward increased independence. The most fundamental is an overriding concern for the interests of the armed forces and the integrity of the institution. The Junta wants to make certain that the military does not become overly identified with the regime through its role as the guarantor of order. The Junta rejected the original antiterrorist bill because it could have involved the military in repression of the regime's opponents. In addition, the Junta apparently has concluded that the best way to avoid having to repress a resurgent protest movement is to implement a somewhat faster pace of democratization than envisioned by the President and the 1980 Constitution. We believe this view accounts for Merino's open contacts with the civilian right.

A second reason for the Junta's growing assertiveness is its desire not to cede any of its power to Pinochet under current circumstances. In our view, the top military leaders believe that the President and the armed forces took power together and should relinquish it together. This explains their rejection of Pinochet's proposal to call plebiscites and replace the Junta with a congress.

[REDACTED]

The Junta also had considerable impact on a major antiterrorist bill. Although the military leadership fully supported a tough stance against terrorists, the commanders of the Navy and the Air Force had serious reservations over Pinochet's proposal. According to the press, they believed the bill shifted too much responsibility for prosecuting terrorists to military courts and gave too much free reign to the National Information Center, the regime's secret police.

[REDACTED]

The Junta also disputed an initiative by Pinochet on a proposed political parties law. The original version of this bill required 20,000 members to legalize a party. Pinochet, however, upped the figure to 150,000 and, in the process, incurred condemnation from almost all political groups.

[REDACTED] Merino [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] told the press that he favored a minimum of roughly 30,000 members to form a legal party. The issue is still unresolved, but we suspect Pinochet will have to accept important alterations.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the Junta's evolving independence has been Admiral Merino's public meetings with independent conservative political leaders to discuss their proposal to hold congressional elections in 1986. In our view, this is a clear indication of the Junta's determination to take a major role in the transition process. At the same time, it underscores the Chilean right's view that the Junta is an autonomous branch of the government.

In many respects, of course, the motives and views of the Junta and Pinochet still coincide. For example, both accept the legitimacy of the 1980 Constitution and want to ensure that conservative anti-Marxist forces dominate any future civilian government. Moreover, while the Junta has shown greater flexibility than the President regarding constitutional reform and has deflected some of his more authoritarian impulses, it in no sense has attempted to usurp his right to rule. Instead, the service chiefs have responded to initiatives from Pinochet or the opposition rather than formulating their own proposals concerning the transition.

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Furthermore, most Junta opposition to the President's initiatives has emanated from the Navy and Air Force commanders. Chile's principal powerbroker, however, is the Army, which consistently has backed Pinochet. A vivid example occurred last May when the President, implicated and probably involved in a land scandal, was able to orchestrate a public declaration of support from 33 Army generals. We believe that, as long as the Army remains solidly in Pinochet's camp, the President will be able to cope with dissidence from the other services. [REDACTED]

Outlook

We believe that the Junta will continue to assert itself over the near term without threatening Pinochet's authority. This probably will continue, resulting in a tempering of Pinochet's hardline stances, and may help assure that he does not rescind the political liberalization measures enacted to date. Over the long-term, however, both Pinochet and the Junta may agree to devolve some powers on a congress—either elected or appointed—installed before 1989. [REDACTED]

Two events, in our view, could cause the Junta and the armed forces to split with Pinochet and, if he refused to alter his policies, lead to his removal from office. First, if Pinochet were to forgo changes in the Constitution and crack down on the entire political opposition, the government could become politically isolated. Secondly, the same could occur in the event of massive and continuing riots and demonstrations—stimulated either by the crackdown or a rapid economic slide. We believe that, in such circumstances, the armed forces would not allow themselves to be used by Pinochet to restore order by force. Instead, the Junta—fearing the prospect of eventual Argentine-like trials of top military leaders—would press Pinochet to change his policies. In our view, Pinochet could not survive a direct showdown with the Junta, especially since even his Army support probably would be jeopardized by intransigence toward political reform. [REDACTED]

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